

## **Grayling Listening Session Summary**

### **Saturday, January 28, 2006**

Council Members Present: Mike Hamm – Michigan State University, Mitch Irwin – Michigan Department of Agriculture, Justin Rashid – American Spoon Foods.

Kirk Heinze, Director of Communication & Technology Services at Michigan State University, facilitated the session, and began with brief remarks and instructions for those present. Mitch Irwin, MDA Director, presented the work and the charge of the Council, and introduced the Council Members present. Approximately 50-60 people were present throughout the listening session.

There were twelve oral presentations of comments, and two written submissions.

- 1) Ben Bartlett, Cheboygan County MSU Extension Director, member of the Cheboygan County Food Policy Team. Mr. Bartlett described the work of the 13 community food policy teams around the state, funded by a USDA SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) grant. He also introduced five additional speakers who would speak in more detail about the concerns, activities and policy implications of the community food teams, and present policy recommendations to the Michigan Food Policy Council (MFPC.)
- 2) John and Cindy Dutcher, Dutcher Farm, Big North Farmers Co-op, members of the Chippewa County Food Policy Team. Mr. Dutcher recommended strongly that the MFPC attempt to reinstate local meat processing facilities (for both red meat and poultry); the current lack of facilities is inhibiting the viability of Michigan livestock farms. Mr. Dutcher also suggested that the MFPC should recommend that MDA should streamline/clarify the guidelines for establishing inspected and certified food processing kitchen facilities and revise regulations that currently limit the sale of locally grown meat to local restaurants.
- 3) Jim Bardenhagen, Leelanau County MSU Extension Director, member of the Northwest Michigan Food Policy Team. Mr. Bardenhagen also represented the Taste the Local Difference Farm Network Team, which is a collaborative regional effort to grow jobs, save farmland and build healthier communities in northwest Michigan. Mr. Bardenhagen suggested the following policy initiatives for the MFPC to support:
  - a. Additional support for MSU Extension agents to serve as entrepreneurial agriculture educators and change agents.
  - b. Planning grants and other incentives for local stakeholders to develop regional partnerships to support innovative farm business initiatives, such as cooperative distribution and small-scale processing.

- c. Additional state investment in MI farm marketing efforts, including agri-tourism and agricultural marketing (*Great Lakes Great Times*, and *Select Michigan*, specifically.)
  - d. Support for consumer outreach programs, specifically linking education and Project FRESH to assist people from diverse economic backgrounds to gain access to local farm fresh foods.
  - e. Support for farm-to-school (and other farm-to-institution) programs to smooth some of the hurdles that these programs face (including bidding, and distribution.)
  - f. Assistance to small-scale meat processing facilities to meet demand to provide high-quality service to nearby farms.
  - g. Support the MSU Product Center.
- 4) Lee Arboreal, organic farmer, member of the Van Buren County Food Policy Team. Mr. Arboreal spoke to the need for more entrepreneurial support programs directed at small and multi-cultural farmers.
- 5) Susan Cocciarelli, Community Economic Development Specialist at Michigan State University. Ms. Cocciarelli concluded the remarks from the Community Food Teams with an overview of their policy recommendations:
- a. Increase access and availability of meat processing by re-instating state meat inspection program (reference the Economic Impact Study done for the MN Department of Agriculture to examine the possibility of expansion in their meat and poultry processing facilities.)
  - b. Reform and streamline MDA guidelines and regulations that currently act as barriers to small-scale processors, on-farm processing and vendors.
  - c. Increase public support for farmers' markets, including: infrastructure grants, promotion and coordination at local level; "grower-only" markets; EBT food stamp machines at farmers markets throughout the state; and allow for sampling of fresh produce and sales of wine, meat and processed goods at markets.
  - d. Expand and support consumer education programs to increase citizens' awareness on the many reasons to buy locally grown foods and support Michigan farmers, including: expanding the *Select Michigan* program; and increasing support for farm-to-school initiatives.
  - e. Expand economic development grants that specifically target and are attuned to the needs of local rural economies.
- 6) Cynthia Price, consumer. Ms. Price suggested that the MFPC recommend that local communities maintain control over the regulation of genetically modified (GM) seeds and GM foods in their communities. Ms. Price mentioned that pollen drift from GM crops can contaminate nearby crops, and thereby threaten the income of organic farmers.
- 7) Claire O'Leary, representing MOFFA (Michigan Organic Food and Farm Association), Sierra Club, and consumer groups. Ms. O'Leary expressed concern

about the possibility of genetic contamination of farm crops. She added that there should be additional research into the impacts of genetically modified (GM) seeds and food before there is state legislation to preempt local control over seeds. Ms. O'Leary made the point that many people are concerned about the health impacts of food, and that there should be more research and support at the state level for sustainable food and farm systems. Ms. O'Leary suggested that consumer-driven emerging local markets are not being protected.

- 8) Louis Nemeth, small farmer and maple syrup producer. Mr. Nemeth expressed concern and disappointment that maple syrup production has recently been classified as a commercial processing activity. He contends that his operation is very small and labor-intensive with a large investment in equipment. He makes a very small profit in his business. Maple syrup production contributes to agri-tourism and should not be regulated as a commercial processing enterprise, but rather as an agricultural production activity.
- 9) Jim Moses, farmer. Mr. Moses expressed concern that current policies ignore the "failures of the last 20-30 years." He questioned food policies that encourage the centralization of the food system, and how this affects our food security and homeland security in general. He noted that a major disconnect in food production is the "distance" between food producers and decision-makers.
- 10) James Anderson, farmer producing fruit with organic methods (not certified organic.) Mr. Anderson suggested that state government should provide greater support for farmers looking to transition from conventional to organic practices. Mr. Anderson stated that the bureaucracy involved in becoming a certified organic grower is overwhelming. Mr. Anderson also suggested that the organic movement should reconsider the use of the word "chemical" (when applied to farm inputs), and should perhaps substitute "toxic" or "prohibited."
- 11) Sharon Goble, farmer. Ms. Goble made five recommendations to the MFPC:
  - a. Michigan should adhere to the precautionary principle on the subject of genetically modified foods and seeds.
  - b. Michigan should ensure that GM crops are tightly regulated and monitored.
  - c. Michigan should promote and encourage the adoption of organic farming practices.
  - d. Michigan should promote a more systems-oriented approach to farming.
  - e. The State should provide greater support to farmers with less than 50 acres.
- 12) Maurine Sharp, owner of a health food store. Ms. Sharp encouraged the MFPC to support Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) at the federal level. Ms. Sharp also expressed concern that organic standards are becoming diluted and are not as meaningful with the consolidation of companies.

- 13) Sarna Salzman, representative of SEED. Ms. Salzman explained that it is important to her, as a consumer, to be able to identify the source and location at which her food is produced. Ms. Salzman recommended that the State support additional investment in appropriate technology (including energy efficiency projects and renewable energy) on farms. She expressed concern over the conversion of land used to grow food crops to land used to grow fuel crops. Ms. Salzman expressed opposition to any State effort to preempt local control of seeds.
- 14) Taylor Reid, MIFFS Agricultural Stewardship Committee and MSU doctoral student (written submission.) Mr. Reid expressed support for the reinstatement of a state meat inspection program and state-inspected meat processing facilities.
- 15) Marlin Goebel, Organic Growers of Michigan (written submission.) Mr. Goebel suggested that Michigan needs more USDA animal processing facilities. Mr. Goebel also said that Michigan needs local fruit and vegetable processing facilities in every county (for canning, freezing or drying), for both personal use and small-scale commercial use.

The session concluded with a reminder that the MFPC welcomes written comments and recommendations at any time and that there will be several more regional listening session opportunities in the near future.